

# FROM CULINARY STUDENT TO CELEBRITY CHEF

HOW CULINARY ALUM 'CHEF T' COOKED HIS WAY TO THE TOP!



Many Long Beach residents know about The Federal Bar, the majestic bank-turned-restaurant that previously housed The Madison. What many might not know is that the popular restaurant's executive chef is a hometown, Long Beach resident himself.

Not only did Chef Tarak Ouk, known as Chef T, hone his chops in restaurants across the city, but he first donned his chef's coat as a Viking.

A graduate of Long Beach City College's [Culinary Arts](#) Program, Chef T has come a long way.

Born one of nine children to Cambodian immigrants in Oakland, his parents moved to Long Beach's Cambodia Town when Chef T was about 8 years old. Upon arriving in the Southern California city, the family knew no one.

The schools were overcrowded, and Chef T recalls being shuffled around to at least four different elementary schools until a school finally had room for him.

"So I never really made friends," Chef T said about his childhood.

But as a youngster, Chef T's innate passion for cooking was already developing. He first learned how to cook by watching his mom and his grandmother.

"There was no Food Network then, no YouTube, no Google," Chef T said. "I was cooking by myself by the age of 5, scrambled eggs, searing steaks."

In 2006, Chef T enrolled in LBCC's Culinary Program, but soon after he took time off from school and took a turn in the wrong direction.

"I started to mess up," he admits. "I started to go to a dark side. I was influenced by street life in Long Beach. Up until my sister died, that's when everything changed."

His 26-year-old sister's life was tragically cut short in 2009, just three weeks away from finishing her master's degree at California State University, Fullerton.

"I was messing up really bad. I hit rock bottom. Whatever you can think of was the worst situation. I was there. I did it," Chef T recalled.

## **When [my sister] passed, something woke me up. I decided to change.**

So he enrolled back into LBCC in 2010. Without a dime to his name, Chef T walked from his home in Eastside Long Beach all the way to the Liberal Arts Campus.

"On a good day, it took probably two-and-a-half hours. On a bad day, maybe three hours," he said.

He relied on fee waivers and borrowed classmates' books.

“There were a lot of people nice enough to let me do that,” he said.

But Chef T didn't get any support or encouragement from neither his family nor his friends.

“Nobody cared. Nobody believed me,” he said. “I was laughed at. I was very mad at the time, but I said ‘I'm going to use it.’ It fueled my fire for sure. I wanted to prove all of them wrong.”

Soon enough, Chef T obtained financial aid, bought a bike and got a bus pass.

“Still nobody believed me. I would get out of school late, and my friends and family would think I was out doing something bad,” he said. “I was heartbroken, very heartbroken.”

But Chef T wasn't discouraged. He kept working hard and persevered.

“I used to volunteer at the [LBCC] cafeteria,” he said. “I volunteered at almost every Long Beach City College event with food.”

His favorite teacher in the Culinary Program is Chef Pierre Jues, whose classes came in handy when Chef T later worked at some donut shops.

“He never got me interested in baking as much, but he was my favorite still,” Chef T said.

One of the most important things Chef T said he learned at LBCC was that being a chef wasn't going to be easy.

“The teachers right off the bat told us that this is not an easy occupation,” he said.

**If you're pursuing this, if you really want to be a chef, it's a hard road ahead. It's going to be the hardest thing you do in your life, and you really have to be dedicated.**

After earning his associate degree in Culinary Arts in 2011, Chef T was hired by the Westin Hotel for three months through an LBCC program. When that program ended, he had to start from the bottom. He knew he had to pay his dues in order to work his way up.

“I took real low jobs – Quiznos, Boston Market, all these other places,” he said. “I was going to do whatever it takes to build my resume. [Those jobs] kick in doors to other restaurants. That's how you get in.”

Chef T started moving up the ladder, working at Chili's, California Pizza Kitchen, Appleby's and Tavern on 2, among many other Long Beach restaurants. His hard work finally paid off when he became a sous chef at the now-shuttered Creperie La Rue in Bixby Knolls.

Then three years ago, Chef T joined the staff at The Federal Bar, helping open up the restaurant.

“I took a pay cut and a demotion to go to Federal,” he said. “I was just a line cook. But I saw potential, I knew something would happen.”

In a short period of time, Chef T moved up from line cook all the way to Executive Chef, a position the 34-year-old was named to about six months ago. He now leads one of the top restaurants in Long Beach – quite an accomplishment, especially for a chef his age.

“It's great when you go to a job and it doesn't feel like a job; it's a way of life,” he said.

Chef T not only turned his life around, proving those around him wrong, but he continues to defy expectations, now of critics and patrons who sometimes are shocked by his age and ethnicity.

“It's awesome. I like to see those [surprised] faces,” he said.

Though Chef T has become a sought-after chef, been profiled in local publications, and will be the subject of an upcoming documentary about his life, all this success and attention hasn't gotten in the way of his down-to-earth disposition. And he hasn't forgotten his roots at LBCC.

“Without [LBCC], I would have never been where I am now. It gave me the tools I needed. It was the first time I put my chef's coat on. I still have my Long Beach City College chef's coat. ... It was the first time I felt like a chef,” he said.

And he tries to hire LBCC culinary students whenever possible.

“I have three of them right now,” he said.

So what's next for the chef?

Chef T is working with the Cambodian community to help build up Cambodia Town into a destination area with a night life scene and better restaurants.

"I want to bring my culture here. I want the food to be out there in the public eye," he said. "I've been offered so many jobs in L.A., better paying [jobs], but I told myself I want to make Long Beach great again. And it's happening."

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